

# **THE BODY LANGUAGE POCKETBOOK**

By Max A. Eggert

*Drawings by Phil Hailstone*

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## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### INTRODUCTION

How do we recognise what is significant from the many signals the body provides? We need to become fluent in the language. In this section we look at seven basic principles that will help to mark out what is relevant.

- 1 The body speaks louder than the words.
- 2 Context is everything.
- 3 Look for clusters.
- 4 Recognise individual consistency.
- 5 Abrupt changes are significant.
- 6 Body language always precedes speech.
- 7 Beware contamination.

## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 1 THE BODY SPEAKS LOUDER THAN THE WORDS

What people say and what they actually think can often be at considerable variance. To pick up on this we need to look for congruence, where what is said is 'mirrored' or 'supported' by the body.

When a manager says, *'Yes, you can go to that conference'* but you get the feeling that they don't really mean it, then you are picking up their body language.

When an interviewee smiles with just the lower part of their face before answering your question, and something tells you that it is 'not quite right', you would do well to remember the Chinese saying: *'Beware the man who smiles only with his mouth'*, a neat way of saying that the upper face must 'match' the lower face.

Can you really say to your boss, *'I am very confident I can meet those new targets'* without your body betraying your real opinion that you have just been given mission impossible?

*'I speak two languages, Body and English.'*  
**Mae West**

## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

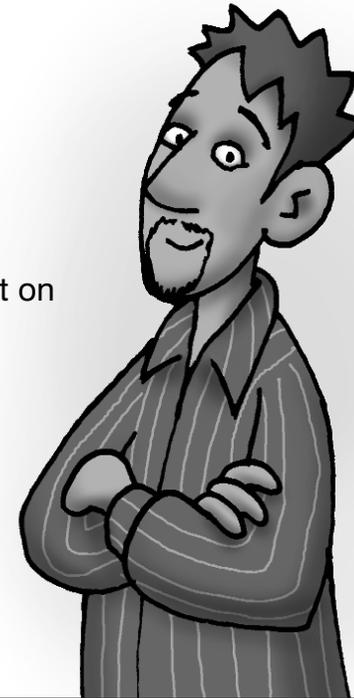
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### 2 CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

All body language has a **context** and we ignore it at our peril. Let's take the popular belief that folded arms suggest defensiveness or disagreement.

**Folded arms can also have an environmental, physical or a cultural meaning:**

- I am cold
- I am comfortable like this as my chair has no arms to rest on
- I am experiencing indigestion
- I want to show off my biceps/slender arms
- I think this is the right way to sit in a formal situation (common amongst school leavers)
- I wish to show off my jewellery



## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 2 CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

**Folded arms could have a personality or interpersonal meaning:**

- I am a reserved person
- I want you to impress me

And possibly:

- I am just sitting the way I always sit – my father also sat like this

Of course, they can also have the popular meaning:

- I am a defensive person
- I am annoyed with you
- I disagree with what you are saying

It all depends on the context. We need the context in order to understand. As you will see in our third principle, it is very rare that just one single item of body language can be taken as a definite indication of anything; two is a strong hint and three co-existing separate signs mean you just may have hit the body language jackpot.

## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 2 CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

Hand to mouth gestures are another good example of the importance of context. Covering the mouth is popularly believed to indicate some form of deceit or the holding back of emotion.

**But, people may place their hand over their mouth because they:**

- Think they suffer from halitosis
- Have forgotten to clean their teeth
- Need significant orthodontic work
- Have an itch on their top lip
- Have tooth-ache
- Have a nevus on their chin



## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 3 LOOK FOR CLUSTERS

In the words of a popular English proverb, *'one swallow does not make a summer'* – nor do two. In body language we need at least three indications, but preferably five, before we might be right.

People might not look at you when they are speaking because something more interesting has caught their eye or because they are not telling the truth. But if looking away is accompanied by at least some of the following...

- Answering a different question
- Biting the lower lip
- Increase in blinking
- Body lifting out of the chair
- Brows clinching
- (Men) A bobbing Adam's apple
- Change in voice volume
- Dilated pupils
- Dry cough
- Hand to mouth movements
- Increased smile rate

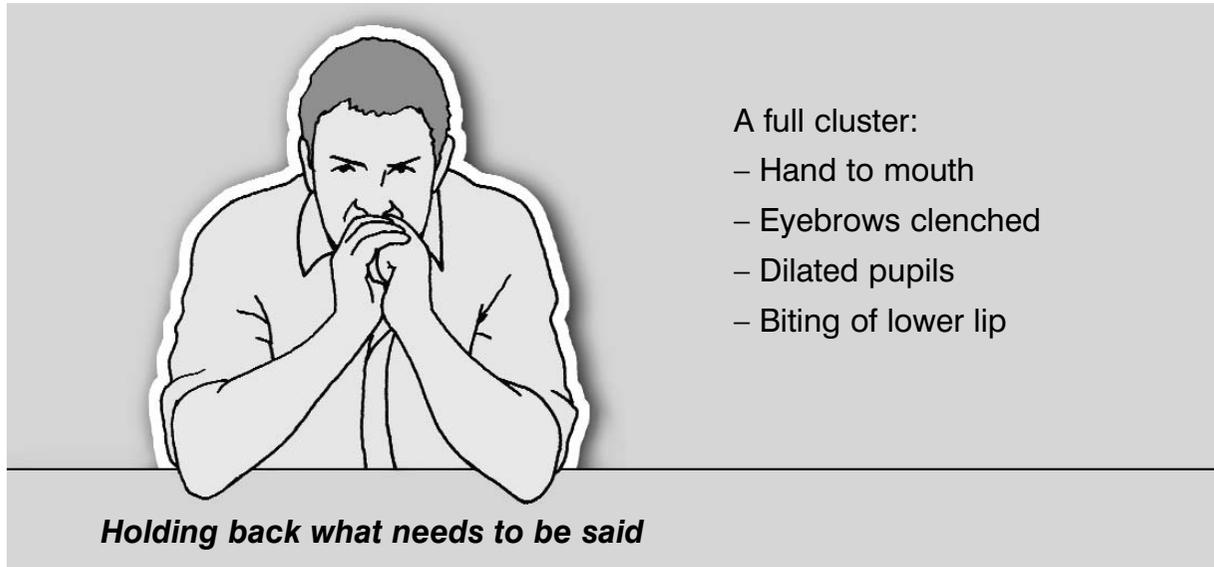
... then, because of the cluster (a whole flock of swallows), they are probably not telling the truth.

We will spend some time on clusters and body language combinations at work, reviewing the predominant body language for each particular situation.

## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

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### 3 LOOK FOR CLUSTERS



## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 4 RECOGNISE INDIVIDUAL CONSISTENCY

Just as people have favourite words, such as *'right'*, *'actually'*, *'you know'*, *'basically'*, which pepper their speech, so too they have individual (idiosyncratic) body language. To understand what someone is saying with their body we must first understand their personal 'tics' or 'tells'. Once we have this we can concentrate on the variations from their 'norm'.

A person may smile frequently, not necessarily because they are happy but because smiling is their 'default' face for the world. Some people frequently look as if they are sneering; it is not that they are arrogant or feel they are superior; it is just their 'face'. Once you know what is normal for them, you have more chance of noticing any overt differences.



## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

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### 5 ABRUPT CHANGES ARE SIGNIFICANT

Feeling and thoughts create changes in body language. Obviously we have to remember the cluster rule (see page 21) but if, when you have asked a particular question during an interview, the candidate physically moves back in their chair, as if your inquiry had 'struck' them, then there is something there that needs to be explored, especially if there are additional signs of anxiety.

Similarly, if there is a sudden change in their speed of speech, then the topic under discussion needs to be explored in greater depth.



## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 6 BODY LANGUAGE ALWAYS PRECEDES SPEECH

People feel before they respond and their body responds before they can think, so speech lags far behind. If someone verbally expresses confidence when accepting some new work with a half smile, and the rest of their body language indicates no such emotions, then you might suspect that the opposite is true. (For genuine confidence, you would expect them to be standing straight; shoulders squared; head raised; high eye contact; high smile rate; low blink rate.)

In the communication game, the body language ace trumps the lowly speech card every time.

'You can see a  
lot by just looking.'  
Yogi Berra

## SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES



### 7 BEWARE CONTAMINATION

It is important when working with others that you are aware of your own body language.

An interesting tendency in humans is that we naturally 'mirror' the person to whom we are talking, especially if we like or admire them. Consequently, before reading too much into an overt change in someone's body movement, you should make sure that it has not been triggered by the same movement that you have just made.

There is more about mirroring on pages 49, 94 and 95.

*'To acquire knowledge, one must study;  
to acquire wisdom, one must observe.'*

**Marilyn vos Savant**

## About the Author

**Max A Eggert, BSc, MA, AKC, FCIPD, CFAHRI, AMBPS, MAPS**

*'Max is an international management psychologist who has the gift of making the complexities of human behaviour understandable and relevant to business.'*  
*Financial Times – London*

Max is Chief Psychologist with Transcareer, an International Management Psychology Consultancy. He has been interviewed frequently on TV, radio and in the print media, both in Europe and Australia. His work and publications have been reviewed in the professional journals and the specialist media. He has also lectured at premier universities as well as leading many professional conferences.

Max first read theology (Kings) as a preparation for the priesthood and through his interest in people undertook degrees in psychology (Birkbeck) and industrial relations (Westminster), moving on to clinical work (Sheffield). He has written 23 books, two of which have been in the UK top ten business books. Several of his titles have been translated into 16 languages and some are on the recommended reading lists of London, Sydney, Harvard, Westminster and Sussex universities.

Married to Jane with four children between them, they live in Bondi Beach Australia and, as an Anglo Catholic priest, Max's joy and privilege is being Priest in Charge of The Communities of Our Lady in the Archdiocese of Sydney. When not praying, writing, consulting or counselling, his other consuming passions are riding his thoroughbred Zeus, walking his dogs Daisy and Bana, attempting to stop the three cats Solomon, Sheba and Pierre from destroying china mementoes, and failing to stop Mary, his Electus parrot, from using expletives.

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